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IS AMERICAN LITERATURE BOURGEOIS?

BY JOSEPHINE DASKAM BACON.

"AMERICAN Literature to-day, taking it as a whole, taking no account of its strangely few exceptions, is the most timid, the most anæmic, the most lacking in individualities, the most bourgeois, that any country has ever known."

This is a very hard saying. It is not only hard to believe, but it is hard to understand. And this combination of difficulties produces a third: it is hard to take seriously. However, as it is uttered in apparent good faith by an unquestionably popular writer, it must be worth consideration; for it would seem that one who knows how to please the public ought to understand the public temper of mind in more than one regard; ought, in short, to represent a certain constituency of public opinion. And in that case the most extraordinary point of view is worthy of comment.

In the first place, before taking up in detail the half-dozen divisions of the criticism in question, it seems to me necessary to suggest that the very basis of Mrs. Atherton's discussion is unsound. It is by no means a foregone conclusion that the technically artistic achievements of a nation—particularly when limited to one branch of artistic expression—should accurately typify the special genius of that nation.

"Compare it [American Literature] even with the enterprise of the four men who, with a few thousand dollars in their pockets, projected and carried to a triumphant conclusion the great Central Pacific Railroad."

In Heaven's name, why? What would the comparison prove?

"It would seem almost superfluous to wonder what would be a European's reply if one asked him what parallel he found between those of our men whom he regards as typical—such men as Roosevelt, Pierpont Morgan, Yerkes, Cleveland or even Croker—be-

tween our imminent financial supremacy, our devouring commercial inroads, our gigantic trusts violating many laws, our colossal strikes, our utter contempt for the survival of the monarchical superstition in the Old World—and our literature. Where is the parallel?"

Where should it be? It would be so superfluous a question, indeed, that few of us are likely to hang upon the European's reply. Does any one inquire disgustedly why modern Italian sculpture does not rival in present interest wireless telegraphy? Is it a reproach to Germany that her railroad system has not impressed itself upon the public as strongly as the Wagnerian music-drama? Would we have respected the Boers more if they had invented a breakfast food?

So far as devouring commercially and striking colossally go, they are rarely coincident with literary parallels; certainly not by the hands of the devourers and the strikers. And it must be remembered that every Croker has not necessarily his Boswell; and that, even if he had, that Boswell would very improbably live in the same generation. No contemporary of Hester Prynne wrote *The Scarlet Letter*; the shadowy prototype of Gawain never chronicled the Round Table; the unfortunate (and immediate) victims of the Exodus did not devote themselves to epic descriptions of the event: they were busy complaining of the quail.

This accounts for the fact that the present attempts to found the great American novel on the last corner in wheat must invariably produce no further-reaching results than a gratifying income for the author: if that factor is to enter the enduring body of our literature, its artistic creator is not yet born. It is the past or passing type that the eye of genius just catches before it vanishes, and impresses in broad outline on the minds of the men to come.

But, even if we admitted that our imminent financial supremacy and our utter contempt for the survival of the monarchical superstition in the Old World called for an immediate literary parallel and failed to get it, it would be a far cry from this state of affairs to the condition described by Mrs. Atherton's later and more detailed statements. No one imagines that, if the nations were to be summoned to-day to the Judgment Seat, and required, each one, to express in one comprehensive word her plea for posterity's recognition, America would elect to stand or fall by her literary

achievements. This modesty, however, does not prevent a profound assurance on the part of even the most casual reader of current fiction that much good work, yes, very good work indeed, is springing up like young saplings among, behind and underneath the mammoth editions of the best-selling books. If Mrs. Atherton has based her criticism upon these anomalies of the publishing business, much acidity of phrase may be forgiven her. It is highly improbable that any one possessed of the slightest literary susceptibility could survive with sanity, not to say composure, the successive perusal of any five books published within the last five years, whose sales have passed the hundred thousand mark.

But why attempt to survive this useless test? One may successfully lay claim to the title of epicure who has never so much as tasted one of those Threaded Grain Biscuits whose production a few years ago revolutionized the breakfast menu of our country. Eat them if you like, realize fully that thousands of boxes a day are sold, but beware of supposing them an essential characteristic of American cookery. The country is large. If our nation's commercial output must be paralleled in letters, I should say that *David Harum* balanced the Threaded Grain Biscuit very adequately.

Moreover, to be perfectly just, Mrs. Atherton is quite inexcusable if she confuses these literary epidemics, for the most part as inexplicable in origin as other epidemics, with the valuable literary output of the time. A critic is precisely an epicure—not one of the general gorgers. An epicure takes account of the truffle and the apricot: he does not condemn a national *cuisine* after a self-selected meal of unsalted potatoes. And Mrs. Atherton would seem to have done just this. If she has never read the best work that is being done to-day, she is incapable of criticism, for an obvious reason; if she has read it and failed to appreciate it, she is incompetent on another count; if she has both read and appreciated, and omitted to mention it, she is surely out of court.

I am convinced, however, from a consideration of her detailed points, that the first supposition is the correct one, and that she has merely failed to inform herself on the subject of her article. For consider the following five points into which her criticism is divided.

"Let us examine," she says, "the causes which govern the 'aristocracy of American letters.' Originality, except in the

mildest form, we have seen, is proscribed. 'What never has been done never can be done,' may be said to be the motto of American literature."

Now, in calling Mrs. Atherton's attention to the enormous evidence to the contrary of this statement, I am going to leave out of the question entirely the admittedly great names in our literature. I am going to grant cheerfully the somewhat unusual concession she demands in the paragraph I have quoted at the beginning of this article: "taking no account of its [American literature's] strangely few exceptions." I shall not mention the work of Mark Twain and Bret Harte; the only two authors selected here for praise, though I question the right of any critic to separate from a given mass of material the best examples of it, on the ground that they are exceptions. I shall not mention the great vogue of Artemus Ward and Bill Nye, whose originality alone outweighed, to the public mind, much coarseness and banality. Nor shall I assume that Mrs. Atherton uses the word "originality" in its absolute sense. If we are to understand by the originality of a form of literature the actually first occasion in the history of man when a style or a subject appeared, our research would in all probability find itself still some distance from the earliest sources when it handled the scratched thigh-bones of the cave-men. I shall take "originality" in the simple sense of an acknowledged departure from the accepted methods, the ordinary subjects. And I shall name the first half-dozen authors that occurred to me instantly on reading Mrs. Atherton's last-quoted sentence, suggested, without catalogues or publishers' announcements, by a memory whose capacity is rather below than above the average.

Is it necessary to mention the enthusiasm that greeted *Wild Animals I Have Known*? These stories did not commend themselves through their biological accuracy: they were read and bought and praised because they were rattling good tales in an entirely new field, and their imitators are only now waning in popularity. The love-affairs of woodchucks, the psychological processes of ground-worms, are feeding and clothing many estimable writers to-day; and many a guileless school-teacher arises at dawn to peep at a sparrow through an opera-glass, listening subsequently with respectful credulity to semi-literary lectures on the social, moral and civic experiences of that unconscious bird,

simply because Mr. Thompson's originality so fascinated us six or eight years ago.

Very recently, Mr. Stewart White, possessed by the solitary, primeval charm of the Canadian woods and the logging camp, delighted thousands of desk-chained townsmen by the novelty of the scenes he spread for them. This success was not due to his mastery of his craft, for not a few short-story writers excel him in technique, in the sense of dramatic situation, in restraint of style, in choice of words. Moreover, he demands a large measure of the easy forgiveness of the city-dweller for that more than occasional gush that, since Rousseau, has invariably accompanied the conscious modern's return to nature. But even the critical-minded forgave him this—for his work was new. Any one who has ever paddled a canoe into the middle of a ten-mile lake has ample material now for a back-to-nature novel.

Still later, Mrs. Martin captured the public heart with one of the most successful collections of short stories recently published. Why did every one fall a victim to the charms of little *Emmy Lou*? It was not because the author possesses an intrinsic felicity of phrase, or because her outlook on life is at all broad, or deep or stimulating. If we are to judge from the opening instalments of her first serial, which are unmarked by one distinguishing feature, this writer has mistaken the power to describe accurately characteristics and situations well known to her for the possession of constructive imagination. There was even nothing unusual or extraordinary in Emmy Lou or her surroundings. Many people who had actually shared her experiences, which were for the most part wholly objective, could have found nothing in them but the recapitulation of their own school-days. But this was precisely the striking originality of the series. To unfold the painfully acquired education of a perfectly ordinary, lovable, middle-class little girl, with no claim upon our attention but her simple humanity and its childlike acceptance of that strange business, life; to offer her childish experiences, not as the prelude to a problem novel, but as an end in themselves; to dare to suggest that, though neither an immigrant, a Jew, a member of some strange religious sect, nor an inhabitant of some tiny last-generation rural hamlet, her sturdy little personality was worthy of chronicle, was indeed an innovation. And it has met a deserved appreciation.

Again, while it is difficult to claim a distinct originality for Mr.

Booth Tarkington's *Monsieur Beaucaire*, it is almost equally difficult to find a literary fragment of its delicate proportions with which to compare it. Even though it was dramatized, it cannot be called a historical novel. It does not deal with that extraordinarily disagreeable social *milieu* naïvely described by the novelist of the Middle West as "American life." Its workmanship has been easily, if not too frequently, matched by other tales whose reception has not been half so loudly acclaimed—and why is this? Because *Monsieur Beaucaire* was a departure, a new effect.

To what does Mrs. Atherton attribute the immense vogue of Mary Wilkins? Not to the information she gave us of the New England character. She did not discover this field. To say nothing of Mrs. Stowe in her generation, Miss Sarah Orne Jewett before Miss Wilkins, and Miss Alice Brown after her, have given us a saner, better balanced, more sympathetic treatment of New England life and spirit; in many cases, too, through the medium of a richer, more cultivated style, a maturer diction, than the author of *A New England Nun*.

What was the first claim, to both critical and general attention, of these famous sketches? Their amazing novelty. This author, unlike the first-mentioned four, excepting, perhaps, Mr. Tarkington, based her success quite as much on novelty of method as on freshness of material, and stands in consequence head and shoulders above them artistically; but she unquestionably owes her first brilliant reception, on whatever deeper and more enduring foundation her reputation with posterity may rest, to her originality.

In connection with this first canon, Mrs. Atherton describes "one of a number of stories which are still fresh in my mind. One, by a popular magazine writer of long standing, is about a girl who went from San Francisco to Chicago in a Pullman car and returned. This is all that happened." Though I do not recall, from this somewhat naïve summary of its plot, the story in question, I am not sure that it is quite fairly dismissed. It makes one wonder if Mrs. Atherton would describe the book of Job as the story of a petulant old gentleman unfortunately afflicted with boils, from which he ultimately recovered? In this connection, too, the fact that a story by Gelett Burgess—and one that was quite unworthy of him, at that,—was the best that this critic could find, or believes that any one can find, "not only in the best of current novels, but in two bound volumes of any one of the

big magazines," makes one curious as to what magazines she reads. That any one should be confined to a story by Gelett Burgess for "a single grace of phrase, a fine thought, careful or distinguished writing," places the genial author of the *Purple Cow* in a new light to most of us. It is pleasant for Burgess, but hard on the other young men who have worked at the short story during recent years, with more generally recognized results.

However, this severe critic admits the existence of "perhaps four or five regular contributors to the magazines who write with distinction, and conform admirably to all the canons of the short story." This is, indeed, as she says further on, "something to be grateful for." It is, in fact, when one considers it a little, perhaps higher praise than Mrs. Atherton, to judge from the context, quite realizes. To write with distinction, and conform admirably to all the canons of the novel, for instance, would not be a bad ideal for a popular novelist.

The second canon, "that this world is not as it is, but as it ought to be," may seem to the logical mind to conflict slightly with a further exposition of it, which describes American writers as "spending their years comfortably describing the little life about them, adding nothing whatever to the knowledge of mankind. . . . They mildly interest people who are used to them, and can get nothing else."

Now, it is necessary to state that, after this paragraph—which abounds in statements of this kind: "It [American literature] is as correct as Sunday clothes and as innocuous as sterilized milk"—and after much complaint of the realism and "littleism" of our novels and stories, together with some previous remarks on Mr. Howells, one is reluctantly forced to the conclusion that much, if not all, of Mrs. Atherton's severity is called forth by what may be safely described as the least exciting work of the Dean of American letters. It does not require much audacity to admit that Mr. Howells has not reached, in all his books, the level of *Indian Summer* or *A Modern Instance*. But this and many more such criticisms were all made some years ago, when many of the most popular writers of to-day were in short petticoats and knickerbockers; and the great influence of *Silas Lapham's* creator has long since been so thoroughly assimilated that it is far less marked than the recent trail of Kipling. What was the year of the two bound volumes of the magazine that Mrs. Atherton read?

I am going to suggest for her perusal three stories recently written by Americans, each one of which I consider to have added directly to the knowledge of mankind, and to show the world, not as it ought to be, but as it is. One of them is called *The Note*. It is one of a series of short stories, *Dr. Lavendar's People*, by Mrs. Margaret Deland, and deals with life in a quaint, aristocratic, old-school village—a kind of American Cranford. The second is called *The Golden Ford*. It is one of a collection, *Red Saunders*, by Henry Wallace Phillips, and deals with cowboy life on the Western plains. The third is called *The Desert*. It is one of two short stories, published together, by Arthur Cosslett Smith, and deals with life in an obscure oasis of the Desert of Sahara.

The first concerns the relations of four men, springing out of their intimate connection with a pathetic, sordid little village tragedy of the kind that was old when Babylon was new. If ever a scene was laid in a *milieu* presumably “as correct as Sunday clothes and as innocuous as sterilized milk,” it is this one. But, unfortunately for Mrs. Atherton’s somewhat surprising point of view, it is not necessary to “see the world” very extensively to realize that the human nature inhabiting it is very much of a piece; and that bitter family pride, cruel obstinacy, starved affections, good-natured vulgarity and broad-hearted, indomitable loving-kindness will act and interact as intensely and inevitably in a tiny rural community as in the most picturesquely cosmopolitan district. Consequently, Mrs. Deland is enabled to show us emotions and situations neither correct nor innocuous, but, through the medium of an art so restrained and simple, displaying a breadth of view so tolerant and sympathetic that the sordidness of the situation is lost in the distinction of the treatment.

The second, which details a few experiences of two occasionally idiotic, often indefensible and always irresponsible miner-cowboys, surpasses, in its general hell-for-leather jollity and its particular pervasive humor, any story of anything of its kind I have read since Huckleberry Finn ran away. Compared with *Red Saunders* *The Virginian* of many editions is, indeed, very nearly sterilized and certainly innocuous. But then, *Red Saunders* is admittedly the hero of several disconnected episodes, and *The Virginian* is only disguisedly so. If in reading this story Mrs. Atherton can find any hint of life as it ought to be, she will have proved herself more studious of American fiction than her recent criticism indi-

cates. But she will find an immense amount of broad-gauge, well-ventilated human nature in it and a larger proportion of quotable humor than this appreciation has room to include.

The third is a love-story of Arabs in the desert. It is direct and simple, with that simplicity of diction which may deceive the mass of ordinary readers, but which could not fail, one would suppose, to impress one of the author's fellow craftsmen with an intense admiration for its subtle art of selection and incision. It has no more concern for conventional morality than *Solomon's Song* or *Without Benefit of Clergy*. It is impossible to mention Sunday clothes or sterilized milk in connection with it, so far are its calm implications of primitive passions and civilized vices removed from these articles. Its delicacy of style and play of epigram surpass the other two tales, and its foreign setting might impress the inexperienced with the fact that its author had more notably "seen the world"; but its technique must chiefly recommend it to the trained observer.

Now, I must insist that I am not unique in my utter lack of personal experience of the three utterly different settings of these three stories—selected, by the way, easily and immediately on the basis of their excellence, and not with a view to their geographical range. I have never lived in a town like Old Chester, or on a ranch, or an oasis in the Desert of Sahara. Many of us, even if we were possessed of Mrs. Atherton's expansive ambition for "seeing life from its peaks to its chasms," couldn't, to use an expressive phrase, quite get around to it—in one incarnation, at least. So these three authors added appreciably to my knowledge, besides giving me great pleasure by the exercise of their technical skill. It is not, emphatically, that I am "used to them and can get nothing else." I can get anything else I want to, more or less, like most of us who have the use of our eyes and a dollar and a half.

I have discussed the second point of this criticism somewhat at length because its examples serve admirably by way of reply to the next in order: "A third canon, which is indeed but a part of the second, is that fiction to be literature—American literature—must be anæmic."

It is impossible to discuss at length this sentence and the still more extravagant one that follows it, because of the haunting and inevitable conviction that Mrs. Atherton has not read very much

American fiction. If *The Note* and *The Golden Ford* and *The Desert* and, for that matter, the other tales in the books which they represent, are anæmic, then I am as ignorant of the meaning of the word as most of us are ignorant of the precise meaning of "*bourgeois*" in the present connection.

In case Mrs. Atherton has read anything of merit since Cooper and Poe, but has not quite reached the last decade, I will go back a little and inquire if she thinks *Posson Jone* anæmic? It is true that Mr. Cable has fallen a victim to that last infirmity of noble minds, the mysteriously entitled historical novel, where his friends must regretfully abandon him; but one need not on that account forget his good years, and *Posson Jone* alone, to say nothing of *The Grandissimes*, will surely add something to Mrs. Atherton's knowledge—if only of American literature.

Is Miss Woolson's *Jupiter Lights* anæmic? Are any of her best short stories?

Colonel Carter of Cartersville may not prove so enduring a type as we once thought, but is he anæmic?

Did Mrs. Atherton find *The Story of Gallagher* anæmic?

This catalogue might be prolonged by any average reader, but to what purpose?

The fourth canon I can only quote, for I am prompt to confess that, though I am perfectly acquainted with the meaning of the separate words, in combination they convey absolutely no idea to my mind:

"A fourth canon is what might be called the fetish of the body. Magazine editors, their confederate publishers, their writers and readers, deify the body, grovel in the dust before it. It never has done and can do no wrong. . . . Let the brain rot. The brain is invisible and insignificant. Let the mind close its doors to the best of literature, to the immensity of life, but let it keep its physical framework even as a little child."

Now what on earth does this mean? What is "the fetish of the body"? I know several magazine editors and their confederate publishers, I know some of their writers and many of their readers; but I never saw one of them deifying this mysterious article or grovelling in the dust before it, and, what is more, until she is more definite, I shall not believe that Mrs. Atherton ever did.

"A fifth canon is that sleep must not be disturbed nor even the nerves titillated."

It is quite unnecessary to discuss this, as the only proof adduced is the statement that a gathering of "demi-fashionable people" once declined to have read to it a "briefly tragic" and "rather terrible" story, on the ground that "there might be sensitive ladies present whose nerves would be distressingly affected." It is to be hoped that the author of this brief and terrible tale took steps to get it before the reading public, in default of the appreciation of the demi-fashionable gathering!

We now come to a heavy indictment of "the prosperous family authors," who, their implacable critic assures us, "are all good family men, who eat well, rarely drink, and are too dull to be bored with their own wives." It is not only safe to say, but comforting to realize, that all men, married or otherwise, eat as well as they can. Or is this an original fashion of suggesting that Carlyle was great because he was dyspeptic? But how can Mrs. Atherton possibly know that "these arbitrary creations of the leading publishing houses and their magazines" rarely drink? If this is an example of what is called internal evidence, it is an interesting one, to say the least. And if they *are* too dull to be bored with their own wives, then how—but I suspect that we are verging insensibly from literary criticism as such. To return to the following assertion that "each could do the other's work and never be detected": Does Mrs. Atherton really seem to see Richard Harding Davis writing Henry Harland's books with any verisimilitude?

"To be great, it is above all things necessary to develop your ego," she continues. This idea has been shared most notably by Marie Bashkirtseff, although more recently by a young country-woman of ours named Mary MacLane. Each of these young persons developed her ego to the exclusion of most other things, and it is only fair to them to add that the only people known to have surpassed them in this regard are the comparatively indistinguishable inhabitants of our leading insane asylums, which furnish many and varied examples of the results of this propensity.

It is a pleasure to find among all these baffling generalities one or two final definite statements. When Mrs. Atherton announces that, "no writer with a real gift and with a real ambition has any business with a home, children, the unintermittent comforts of life which stultify and stifle," at least we see where she stands—though not, perhaps, why she stands there. When she asks, "If

a man has the gift to write, to create,—the greatest of all gifts,—what more does he want?" the answer is very easy, because the question is so perfectly clear. The experience of the world has proved that such a man wants everything more than this gratified and grateful world can give him, and that the first things he sets about getting are a home and children—and the unintermittent comforts of life, if he can, though neither of the former acquisitions affords any certainty of the latter. A writer with a real gift and a real ambition may have no business with these things, but from the time of David the Psalmist he has done his best to get them, and almost uniformly succeeded. And, such being the deeply rooted tendency of human nature, it is improbable that contemporary criticism of it will affect the present or the future generations much more deeply than, in the nature of things, it can affect the dead and gone.

When our critic goes on to say that it is difficult for women to take life impersonally, no one of the thousands who have said it before will deny that she is within her rights. But when she goes on to lament the further improbability of her sex's "developing the strength of brain and ego triumphantly to override every convention and always remain high and dry, always the spectator, whom no circumstance can affect," one is disposed to congratulate these "miserable victims of their own personalities" on their disabilities. Personally, I admit freely that the only objects I have ever met or heard of, of whom it could be said that they "remained high and dry, always the spectator, whom no circumstance could affect," are some of Bulwer Lytton's heroes and the mummies in a museum.

Mrs. Atherton makes but one other and final remark that directly challenges comment; but that one, in view of the extraordinary manner in which she follows it up, it is impossible to pass over, since it illuminates so vividly her curious method of criticism.

"Who cares to-day," she demands, "that Poe was a drunkard, Coleridge an opium-eater, that Byron had forty mistresses, and George Sand forty lovers?"

As a matter of purely personal taste, if the works of George Sand are to be attributed in any degree to her having had forty lovers, I wish she had had either eighty, or none at all. But as far as Poe is concerned, I regret exceedingly that he was a drunk-

ard, as did his friends, acquaintances and publishers. When I read the best of his unique work and then observe into what hysterical flightiness it is capable of degenerating; when I consider his early and tragic death, and his hampered and unhappy life, I devoutly wish that some less valuable writer might have inherited his misfortune in his stead, and left him free to make one of our greatest names greater.

When I reflect on those of Coleridge's lines that are unsurpassed in English poetry, and realize how few those lines are—but why continue in this vein? Mrs. Atherton herself, in a somewhat dizzy turn, after tolerantly assuring us that "excess is not necessary," and that "many of the greatest men in literature have been sane, and careful of themselves,"—which explains, probably, why George Sand is not forty times as great as George Eliot, and why Wordsworth had at least forty per cent. of Byron's inspiration—confuses, if she reassures, us by asserting that "the temperaments that demand artificial stimulation pay a bitter price, *and, what is worse, limit their contribution to art*"! So we may infer that Mrs. Atherton, like the rest of us, "cares that Poe was a drunkard and Coleridge an opium-eater."

And here, in a totally unexpected and unaccountably ascetic diatribe against the use of coffee—a mine of resource to the manufacturers of the probably valuable cereal beverages—this extraordinary criticism closes. Just, to state it strongly, as we begin to feel that Miss Jewett's art could be improved by a course of slumming, or at least a slight addiction to morphine, we find ourselves wondering what Mark Twain might have accomplished if he had never tasted coffee!

At any rate, even if all American fiction is anæmic, some American criticism escapes that adjective. Might we not call it, rather, apoplectic?

JOSEPHINE DASKAM BACON.